



## OPINION

# Convention Center should go back to the Drawing Board

Thursday, March 11, 1999

By PETER STEINBRUECK  
SPECIAL TO THE POST-INTELLIGENCER

*Streets and their sidewalks, the main public places of a city, are its most important vital organs.*

### -- Jane Jacobs in "The Death and Life of Great American Cities"

As the City Council considers whether to approve a massive expansion of the Washington State Convention and Trade Center, I am reminded of a lesson my father, the late architect and urbanist Victor Steinbrueck, taught me about good design of cities:

"Every building and street, every bridge and highway, every man-made element, whether beautiful, mediocre or ugly, is part of the city and conveys a message about its people."

As a child in the early 1960s, I often joined my father on weekend outings to sketch scenes of Seattle's unique urban landscape. He would point out contrasting examples of the good, the bad and the ugly: ornate, refined old homes and buildings and the brutal "architectural monstrosities" of the '60s; lovely tree-lined boulevards of the Olmstead legacy and cold asphalt streets cluttered with pole lines and billboards; enlivened public places and the barren plazas of modern office towers.

From his perspective, good urban form required placing civic values above private gain. The city's physical character should express its diverse social, cultural and economic resources on a human scale. And that as we make and remake the city, its people should control its destiny.

Seattle is in the midst of an unprecedented building boom that is transforming the physical character of the city. Since many of the projects are taxpayer-funded and are in the public domain -- including new libraries, a new City Hall, Seattle Center improvements, sports stadiums and Sound Transit stations -- the public should have a strong, guiding influence over their design.

The people elected me to the City Council in part for my background and expertise as an architect at a time when the city is being dramatically reshaped. We are creating a lasting legacy of new civic buildings that I want us to be proud of.

The expanded Convention Center will cover five city blocks with more than 350,000 square feet of exhibit and convention space, a new 16-story office building, a 450-room hotel, parking for 1,250 cars, 45,000 square feet for retail and possibly a new home for the Museum of History and Industry. The plan also requires the city to vacate five street and aerial rights of way. (A street or aerial vacation is a permanent reuse of a public right of way for some other permanent purpose such as a building or skybridge.)

Across Pike Street, two 90-foot-wide, structurally heavy aerial bridges are proposed. One bridge at Ninth Avenue and Pike Street will accommodate semi-truck-trailer combinations for loading and unloading exhibits. Another bridge near Seventh Avenue and Pike Street provides a pedestrian crossing and three sections of exhibit floor space. A 268-foot-long, barrel-vaulted, glass and steel canopy will soar 125 feet above Pike Street and the pedestrian bridge.

In deciding whether to vacate a public right of way, the City Council must consider if doing so will provide a long-term public benefit and it may put conditions on, or even deny, street vacations to protect the public interest.

There are three components that the council must weigh in determining the public interest:

- the impact of the proposed vacation on circulation, access, utilities, light, air, open space and views provided by the right of way;
- the impact of the building form and its consistency with existing land-use regulations for the area where the right of way is located;
- the benefits the public will receive from the vacation. Under state law, a public right of way may not be vacated unless the city determines that the vacation is in the public interest.

Thanks to the moat created by the I-5 freeway, Capitol Hill and the Pike/Pine neighborhood have been severed from the downtown. Pike Street is one of the few links to the heart of the retail core and the Pike Place Market. The view down Pike Street at Boren Avenue takes in the bustling streetscape, the famous red neon "Public Market Center" sign, Elliott Bay, the hill of West Seattle and the sky beyond.

Walk up Pike Street. On the north side, it is a virtual wasteland from Seventh Avenue up to Boren Avenue, with parking lots, traffic signs, cracked, uneven sidewalks and noisy traffic. Worse yet is the gaping discontinuity created by the freeway cut beginning at Ninth Avenue. On the south side of Pike Street the blank facade of the Convention Center looms above, with only shrubbery to soften and conceal its blandness.

The Convention Center expansion project has the potential to reconnect Capitol Hill and the Pike-Pine neighborhood with downtown and bring new life to the area. The original Convention Center project in the 1980s did much to restore the broken urban fabric by lidding the freeway and expanding Freeway Park. The expansion could and should achieve more of the same.

Unfortunately, the proposed expansion plan works in the opposite direction. The hulking five-block building, with nine street and aerial vacations, becomes even more of a graceless behemoth. From the west, the glass and steel canopy over Pike Street would be a self-aggrandizing gesture to the Convention Center that is functionally unnecessary, awkwardly connected and turns its back on its neighbors to the east.

The Pike-Pine neighborhood will lose its extended view of Elliott Bay and will instead see an uncovered truck bridge above the street with a succession of up to 85 semi-trucks crossing before and after a convention. Together, the bridges and soaring canopy over Pike Street cut off views from the corridor and reduce public enjoyment of precious light, air and open space.

What a blow to this newly revived and vibrant urban neighborhood.

To mitigate the negative impacts of the expansion, the plan includes a \$3.5 million canopy, or "Galleria" as the designers refer to it, which is described as a "place-making" feature intended to encourage pedestrian lingering on Pike Street. But an average of 1,000 cars, trucks and buses travel hourly down Pike Street.

The proposed canopy raises several troubling questions:

- Will a huge, arching canopy cause traffic noise to reverberate and the wind to accelerate?
- How will all that glass overhead be kept clean and in good repair?
- Will it become a favorite shelter for pigeons to roost?
- As it will be open to the air and 125 feet above the street, will it really encourage pedestrians to linger?
- And is it the best use for the millions in mitigation dollars?

A better approach would be to strip off the view-obstructing canopy or reduce its size and relocate it eastward to acknowledge the Pike-Pine neighborhood as the front entrance to downtown.

The truck and pedestrian bridges are clunky and utilitarian looking. The Convention Center folks insist the bridges are functionally essential to the expansion, but they have not made convincing arguments for their large size. The bridges should be scaled down and redesigned with greater structural elegance. In doing so, the bridges themselves could become the defining elements, obviating the need for the faux Galleria as the place-making feature.

Finally, to better respond to the land-use impacts of the five-block mass of undistinguished buildings that will make up the expanded facility, the Convention Center also needs to extend its largesse beyond its boundaries and connect with its neighbors. That can be done in part by

extending street-level amenities such as street lighting, art work, banners, planters and other pedestrian improvements up Pike Street across the freeway bridge, at least to Boren Avenue and Four Column Park.

In the opposite direction, the Convention Center should complete the street-level improvements proposed by the Pike Streetscape Project along the Pike Street corridor to First Avenue and the Pike Place Market.

The Washington State Convention and Trade Center expansion is a public works project that is predicted to bring great economic benefit to the city and state. With the bulldozers raring to go and the pressure on for the City Council to hastily approve the \$167 million Convention Center expansion, let's not let ourselves be boxed into a weak design concept that permanently compromises the public realm by turning its back on its neighbors and sacrificing one of downtown's most prominent city streets.

The convention center should go back to the drawing board to better integrate its plans with adjacent neighborhoods and reconnect this part of downtown with the urban fabric of the city.